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It's convenient to buy a paper off the Internet, but plagiarism is serious business and the stakes are high.

BY VARAD DIWATE DESIGN NAILAH FITZGERALD

During his academic career, Greenlee School Director Michael Bugeja has met people accused of plagiarism and often heard a common response, "It was just a coincidence."

To check this claim, Bugeja engaged physicists and mathematicians to calculate the odds that an 67 word passage would show up in two writings as a coincidence. The findings were published in a chapter in his book "Living Ethics." The odds were a lot worse than winning a seven-number lottery.

"According to one calculation, it would take more time than exists from the Big Bang to have an 67 word passage just appear the same," Bugeja says. "It's phenomenal. These are called statistical odds of impossibility, not probability, but impossibility."

What is it about?

Plagiarism boils down to the basics of research and writing—differentiating your ideas from those of others and properly attributing any borrowed material. Students learn about it in high school, college and from instructors in every course, yet it

continues to be a recurring issue among college students and professionals.

Last year, 213 students were reported to the Dean of Students Office for academic misconduct. Joe Campos, a judicial affairs hearing officer in the Dean of Students Office, says plagiarism is the most common form of academic misconduct reported. Copying from exams and other forms of misconduct are not reported that often.

The Academic Misconduct Policy at Iowa State covers cheating, copying and plagiarism. The policy is found in the class syllabus and students are reminded of the policy by their instructors at the start of the semester.

Campos adds that students often fail to understand what constitutes plagiarism.

"A lot of times I end up explaining to students that summarizing someone else's ideas, even if you don't quote them directly, is something you need to cite," he says, "Students come from a variety of states, countries, cultures and writing levels where they might not be as familiar with those types of nuances when it comes to writing a research paper."

He usually finds an influx of academic misconduct cases around finals week when students are more likely to make poor choices due to time constraints.

Students suspected of academic misconduct are reported to the Dean of Students Office by their instructors. A judicial officer determines if a student indeed plagiarized.

Using large amount of text quoted verbatim with proper attribution in a research paper is probably not plagiarism. However, Bugeja says it can be classified as a copyright violation.

"The other problem is when students, in a writing exercise or paper, lift information from a source document and paste it onto their target document without any citation, thinking that they did 'research' and that this is an acceptable thing in the Internet age," says Bugeja.

It's recommended that instructors direct students to the Dean of Students Office if suspected of academic misconduct. It helps students get a fair hearing and adds to a centralized university database of student misconduct. Thus, there is a track of student behavior across departments and programs.

So what happens to my grade?

Students are most worried about their grades in the particular class and assignment. However, this decision is made by the instructor for a specific class and not a judicial officer.

A decision on misconduct cases is typically made based on individual circumstances and assessment by a judicial officer. A student's history and his/her approach to the decision is also taken into account.

Uncovering the plot

Campos adds that more often than not, the evidence of plagiarism is quite clear and students are also willing to accept wrongdoing on their part. However, students also say that they were not familiar with this type of misconduct and the resulting consequences. Students who intentionally commit plagiarism often know about severe consequences, yet hope that they don't get caught.

Campos says instructors usually detect misconduct through a change in writing or by coming across ideas they have read before. Sometimes its even from a reading assigned to the class. Another resource for instructors is SafeAssign on Blackboard, which scans its database of online websites and student papers to find a percentage match of similar content. Instructors can then check if text used from another source was cited in the paper.

Sanctions by the Dean of Student's Office include warning, probation and deferred suspension. If found guilty by a judicial officer, a professor also has the right to change the grade on an assignment. It is recommended that students also meet with their professor, as they'll likely be in the class for the rest of the semester and will need to maintain trust.

"The thing that makes each conversation different is what the student brings to it—the student's perspective and ability to take responsibility or explain what happened," Campos says.

He adds he has usually handed out warnings if students are upfront about their mistakes and demonstrate that they genuinely learned from the experience. However, sanctions vary a lot depending on individual circumstances.

I didn't mean to...

A usual refrain by students when they are found to be guilty of plagiarism is that they did not know that it was wrong. "From a legal perspective, if you commit a crime, it doesn't matter whether or not you knew what you were doing or not—ignorance of the law is not an excuse," says Bugeja.

Some students believe they accidentally plagiarized by forgetting to mention a source during writing.

"Students may not realize it's wrong but it's pretty intentional to cut and paste something from a webpage or a document and represent it as their own. It's hard to do that by accident," says Gary Mirka, associate dean of the College of Engineering.

TIPS

Cite! Cite! Cite!

Talk to the professor and clear your doubts. Group assignments can be especially tricky.

Consider turning in an assignment late rather than one without proper attribution.

Plan ahead.

Learn to cite.

A lot has changed with the advent of the internet. As noted by Katie Hafner in the New York Times article "Lessons in Internet Plagiarism" published on June 28, 2001, it is easy to plagiarize using the internet and even easier to detect it.

"[Plagiarists] don't say it's a coincidence anymore. They say, 'I didn't know it was wrong,' Bugeja says.

However, this response just brings forth a possibility that the person was also negligent as they did not apparently learn the basics of plagiarism through high-school and college.

Better safe than sorry

According to Campos, the causes for plagiarism often boil down to poor time-management skills and planning, which lead a student to take risky and unethical decisions.

"Students need to realize that it's not life or death with every assignment—sometimes turning in something late but well-done is better than turning in something in time with plagiarism," he says.

Colleges also take steps so that students understand plagiarism and take due steps to avoid it. Mirka says a special course for graduate students in the college of engineering related to research ethics includes substantial focus on plagiarism.

Plagiarism can be even trickier when it comes to group work and individual work. Mirka says students in the engineering program are often encouraged to work in groups as they would be working the same way in the professional world.

"I would advise students to be clear what the expectations are in terms of group work versus individual work," he says. "There are some gray areas like lab reports that are sometimes done as a group and sometimes as individuals."

Think about it...

Campos stresses on the implications of receiving a very low or failing grade in a class due to academic misconduct. The consequences turn out to be serious for students who would soon be graduating. It can affect your graduation term and GPA.

"The closer you get to graduation, the less wiggle room you have to buffer any of the side effects of being found responsible. The stakes are really raised," Campos says.

Cases of academic misconduct go quite far in their effects. Mirka says plagiarism also raises questions about institutional integrity as it does about individual integrity.

"It affects the value that people place on a diploma from Iowa State," he says. "We don't want to have a reputation of allowing academic misconduct to go unpunished—we are very sensitive to maintaining the quality of education."

Bottom line...

Differentiate your thoughts from those of others. ☺